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The study outlined in this document is a qualitative content analysis of the representation of first-generation American teens in young adult novels that have been published since 2017. More specifically, it analyzes how these novels portray the experiences of first-generation American teens and the significant themes in these novels. The sample includes eight young adult novels depicting diverse cultures and experiences among first-generation American teens in order to conduct a representative analysis of these themes. The goal of this study is to demonstrate to librarians the ways in which they can critically evaluate these texts for their own purposes by providing an in-depth analysis of a sample of the current literature.

Headings:

Content analysis—Young adult literature.

Multiculturalism.

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WITHIN AND WITHOUT: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FIRST-GENERATION AMERICAN NARRATIVES IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by
Nicole Cvjetnicanin

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Approved by

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Casey Rawson

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this paper to my *baba* and *deda* for their bravery in leaving their homeland to make a new life for themselves and their family in a completely foreign country.

I dedicate this paper to my parents, without whose sacrifices and positive examples this paper would not exist.

I dedicate this paper to all of the children straddling the line between their family's culture and the culture of the country in which they live. I hope that this work will encourage you to share your stories with the world.

Introduction

The United States of America is a nation whose history is full of stories of immigration. Long before the first British colonists settled on the eastern coast of North America, groups of nomadic tribes made their way from Asia to North America by way of the Bering Land Bridge. Every individual who lives in this country is the descendant of an immigrant. Some of these family lines have been in the United States much longer than others, but that does not change the fact that this country is entirely founded on immigration. Throughout its history, the United States has become a beacon of hope for groups of people escaping dangerous and oppressive situations around the world. However, the historical trend of xenophobia pervades in the society and government to this day. As a nation of immigrants, the American people must rally behind their fellow human beings rather than ostracizing them.

One of the best ways to change how a society treats its members is through the education of young people. They indeed are the future leaders of this country, and they need to be taught compassion and empathy for all groups of people, not just those people to which they can directly relate. The best way to teach young people in this way is to develop collections in schools and libraries that reflect the growing diversity of our nation and the world. When children and teens read books that depict experiences and cultures that are different from their own, they can feel as though they are a part of this

story, and they can relate to the book's characters. Ultimately, this sense of connection will pervade in their daily lives.

For this research study, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of eight young-adult novels with first-generation Americans as the protagonists. These books depict immigrant families from all over the world in order to represent a diverse selection of subjects. All of the books in my research sample were published in or after 2017, the year that divisive president Donald Trump took office. Now, more than ever, the American people need to empathize with and support our immigrant communities. I hope that by conducting this research study, I can inspire more librarians to diversify their collections and to evaluate young adult literature featuring first-generation Americans for use by their communities. I also hope to teach young people that they are more like these characters than they might think, no matter how different their experiences are.

Literature Review

As a nation with a historically diverse populace consisting of immigrants from all over the world, immigration has long been a topic of contention in our society. Historically, the United States has not been altogether welcoming to immigrants from around the world. In the late twentieth century, this issue seemed to be improving. However, in the years since September 11, 2001, the United States government has passed several laws and legislative acts that mistreat immigrants. In this current political climate rife with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) home invasions and prejudiced rhetoric from the nation's leaders, librarians must make their libraries into spaces in which immigrant families can feel safe and accepted. One of the first steps in this process is developing a multicultural collection with materials from a diverse group of authors on a variety of subjects and experiences. However, in order to create these collections, one must first take a look at the history surrounding immigration in this country—especially over the last hundred years—and the relevant literature that has been written on the subject.

Background & Current Events

On February 29, 1952, President Harry Truman signed the joint resolution that created Citizenship Day (Kang, 2019, p. 4). This action came at the time of an incredibly divisive conversation about immigration and who should be allowed to come to the United States. This situation, unfortunately, culminated in the McCarran-Walter Act,

passed on June 27, 1952, despite President Truman's veto. This act "would largely preserve a race-based approach to selecting immigrants" (Kang, 2019, p. 3). However, the situation improved under the Johnson administration with the passage of "the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, sex and nationality in admitting immigrants" (Kang, 2019, p. 3). Despite these strides, the United States government continues to oscillate on its position regarding how immigrants should be treated and welcomed into this country.

More recently, the Department of Homeland Security created a new rule that effectively discourages immigrants and their families from using government assistance programs (Metellus & Phenulus, 2019, p. 1). This rule, which went into effect on October 15,

> says that a person who receives one or more public benefits for more than 12 months in the aggregate within any 36-month period may be deemed ineligible to apply for legal residency or petition to be reunified with family members living in the home country. (Metellus & Phenulus, 2019, p. 2)

Although the official explanation for this new rule is a focus on "'controlling' immigration, this policy has an exponentially harmful impact on the lives of hardworking legal residents and naturalized and U.S.-born citizens" (Metellus & Phenulus, 2019, p. 2).

Fortunately, some communities are rallying around their immigrant residents and helping them face the challenges that this rule will inevitably bring. In south Florida, the Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center and the Haitian Lawyers Association have teamed up to advance "the administration of justice and [protect] the general welfare of the…[c]ommunity, to educate immigrant families about the public charge rule" (Metullus & Phenulus, 2019, p. 2). They hope to inform and help protect the immigrant families for whom this new rule comes as just another policy in a series of efforts to limit

immigration to the United States and to weed out those immigrants who are already living here.

One of the most high-profile issues facing our nation's immigrants and their loved ones is the recent wave of ICE raids and mass deportations of undocumented immigrants. While this affects everyone in these communities, it primarily affects the children of those who have been deported or are in danger of being deported. Children in immigrant communities all over the United States have been experiencing heightened anxiety and distress, which has affected not only their mental health and well-being but also their ability to learn. Last year, the Civil Rights Project at UCLA "surveyed thousands of teachers and found that recent immigration political instability was significantly disrupting students' well-being and, correspondingly, their learning" (Williams & Villareal, 2019, p. 3). Now more than ever, children from immigrant families need support from the people around them and from the books they read. By introducing narratives about children and teens who either came to this country with their parents or were born here to immigrant parents, young people in these communities will start to feel less alone with the abundance of stories to which they can relate.

Many children and their families fear deportation from the United States. In many cases, this deportation means serious consequences when they return to their native countries. Often it can mean imprisonment and/or execution, depending on the policies of the country. At best, many immigrants who are deported arrive in a place that is wholly unlike what they experienced before they moved to the United States. In many cases, parents who are deported end up bringing their kids back to a country in which they have never lived. Even for the parents who are originally from these countries, their homelands

are often not the way they were before immigration. Osa Fasehun (2019) discussed the turmoil they felt after Trump was elected and how their mother worried that they would be sent to Nigeria, the country where their mother was born but in which they had never lived. During a heated discussion about their options in the face of the current political climate, Fasehun's mother exclaimed that they "'have no place to go! The Nigeria [she] knew in childhood doesn't exist anymore. [She] would be a foreigner in [her] own country'" (Fasehun, 2019, p. 2). In light of this conversation and the general unease felt by Fasehun and their family, Fasehun states that "[i]mmigration can be a catch-22 that causes you to feel like a perpetual alien, forever a foreigner in both the land you emigrated from and the one you sought refuge in" (Fasehun, 2019, p. 3). Rather than making immigrants feel welcome and safe, many people in this country have sought to bar entrance to asylum-seekers and to chase out those who were able to make a life here.

Although there are plenty of stories of xenophobia and downright hatred surrounding the issue of immigration, there are also stories of kindhearted, empathetic individuals seeking to make the experiences of immigrants easier. These individuals include "a United Airlines gate agent in McAllen, [Texas,] who welcomed a couple of migrants to her home, so they had a warm place to stay, even for a night" (Garcia, 2019, p. 6) and lawyers at Gardner & Mendoza PC Immigration Law, who provide "free legal assistance to immigrants who need help filling out their application for U.S. citizenship" (Cunningham, 2019, p. 1). So although many of the stories surrounding the immigrant experience can be disheartening and upsetting, there are instances of people committing kind acts for those who are facing the ordeal that is immigration to the United States.

The history of immigration to the United States is long and troubled. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Bisbee Deportation of 1917, the United States government and its constituents have a very tumultuous relationship with xenophobia and prejudice against immigrants, even though most U.S. citizens are descendants of an immigrant, with the exception of members of Native American populations. If people focused more on similarities with each other than differences, their hatred might become less fervent. Therefore, libraries all over the country need to incorporate diverse books into their collections. These books serve as an opportunity for immigrant and first-generation American children to feel represented in the literary canon, and they also teach other children empathy for people who have to deal with the struggles associated with immigration.

Why Diverse Books?

At a time when immigrants and their families continue to be marginalized and excluded from American society, the ubiquitous presence of diverse books depicting their experiences not only serves to make them feel seen, but also to inform other Americans about these experiences and make them more aware of what immigrant families are subjected to while trying to live in this country. No matter the racial or ethnic makeup of the community, all library collections should include a variety of sources relating to diverse experiences for all to read.

Mirrors/Windows/Glass Doors

One of the most influential reasonings behind the need to include diverse books in collections is the ‘mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors’ theory. Rudine Sims Bishop introduced this theory in their 1990 article in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books*

for the Classroom. This theory posits that some books provide windows through which readers can view a world that might be wholly different from their own, while some books are mirrors through which readers can read about characters with experiences similar to their own. Some books are sliding glass doors, where the windows become an entrance—through the imagination—into the world of the book. This theory is essential to this topic because it defines how all readers—no matter their background—can experience young adult novels about immigration and growing up multicultural in the United States.

Although Bishop first wrote about it almost twenty years ago, many writers and library professionals point to their work as one of the key reasons to collect multicultural collections for libraries. According to Bishop,

> [b]ooks are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop, 1990, p. 1).

People enjoy books in which they can see themselves in the characters. It makes them feel less alone in their experiences. For children from multicultural backgrounds, this can be especially challenging when the white majority writes most of the children's and young adult novels, which are usually about white majority characters. When collections include books written about characters from what Bishop calls "parallel cultures," children and teens from these groups can see themselves in the books they are reading (Bishop, 1994, p. 105). This parallelism in reading is essential for childhood and

adolescent development, because "[w]hen children cannot identify with a book or see their lives celebrated through stories, it may have an effect on their self-image. The message they get is that their lives and their stories are not important" (Willett, 1995, p. 175). When children do not see themselves depicted in the books they read, they feel undervalued by the society in which they live, and this can significantly affect their mental health and development.

However, it is crucial to ensure that the multicultural books brought into the library do not enforce stereotypes or harmful attitudes about different groups of people. In the past, many books depicting the lives of members of minority groups have tended "to focus on crime, teen pregnancy, drugs, immigration, and/or poverty, reinforcing stereotypes for both minority and nonminority teen readers" (Younker & Webb, 2005, p. 197). While these experiences are accurate for some people, they are not the experiences of all members of minority groups. The ubiquity of these harmful stereotypes in multicultural literature leads to incorrect assumptions on the part of non-minority readers and diminishes the self-esteem of minority readers.

Children from multicultural backgrounds can significantly benefit from reading accurate representations of people like them that are portrayed sensitively and knowledgeably. Those

> kids who are regarded by their peers and even by themselves as being somehow 'other' need to see themselves in books to know that they are not alone. Such knowledge is not only comforting; it may be positively life-changing and -saving. Secondly, and equally important, kids who are not outsiders need to read about those who are in order to develop empathy, a quality that is presently in short supply, if the dramatic increase in bullying offers any evidence. (Cart, 2012, p. 61)

Bullying stems from hatred, and hatred often stems from misunderstanding. However, if children are exposed to multicultural works, then minority youths can feel seen, and non-minority youths can learn about compassion and embracing the differences between different groups of people.

Multicultural books should not just be collected for minority teens to read. Non-minority teens can benefit significantly from reading books about people with different experiences than themselves. They

> may look through the windows of such books and meet an accessible character…[and] through his eyes they may be able to see their familiar world differently, and perhaps occasionally recognize what at first seems foreign as native to their own experience. (Hsu, 1995, p. 240)

This way, not only do the teens read a story about someone who has different experiences than they do, but they can also build a sense of empathy for others by connecting to these stories on a deeper level. When teens find commonalities between their life and that of characters in multicultural books, it helps them to understand more fully these characters and what they represent.

Librarians have a vital role in exposing teens to books about cultures that are different from their own. If librarians seek to teach cultural awareness to children and teens, then they

> need to select books with rich potential to become sliding glass doors, to link books thematically, and to guide readers in ways to respond deeply to these books. (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 573)

This guidance can help teens learn how to talk about cultural, racial, and ethnic differences respectfully and inclusively. Hilary S. Crew (1997) even suggests that librarians guide "workshops and discussions with and about young people [to] contribute towards more plural and inclusive frameworks in conceptualizing services for a diverse

and multicultural population of young adults" (Crew, 1997, p. 176). If young people can discuss these issues with understanding adults and with each other, they are more likely to internalize the importance of these conversations and their implications in the community and the world.

During these conversations with teens, librarians should bring up specific issues from the books and relate them to issues in their community. As a result, these books

> can help students develop their awareness of social issues and the impact of personal choices. Discussion around issues raised in these books can help students become more open to new ideas and divergent opinions and, when supported by educators, children and youth may rise to challenge injustice and take social action. (Moreillon & Cahill, 2010, p. 27)

By exposing children and teens to these narratives and then discussing them, educators can help young people become more culturally conscious, empathetic individuals. As a result, they might be inspired to take action in their community and work to help the greater good.

#OwnVoices

In recent years, #OwnVoices has become a popular hashtag on social media. Users on platforms like Twitter will use the hashtag to recommend and discuss books about diverse characters written by authors from the same group as the characters in the book. This movement has also started a conversation about who should be writing diverse books. Many critics oppose the idea that outsiders can write about a diverse group of which they are not a part. Dr. Dianne Johnson-Feelings explains that

> [h]istorically, it is white writers who took or were granted license to write about… other cultures — that's exactly what multiculturalism means to many in the publishing world. Instead of opening the industry to voices from various communities, multiculturalism has meant, and still means to some, having white Americans tell the stories of 'others' instead of having 'others' writing their own stories. (as quoted in Campbell, 1993, p. 491)

Therefore, the #OwnVoices movement pushes back against this imperialistic tradition of white writers holding a monopoly on literature with any modicum of so-called diversity.

Another reason that #OwnVoices is so essential is because multicultural and diverse stories should be told by those writers who can accurately portray minority groups. If an outsider writes about a group, how can the reader be sure that the depiction is at all accurate? Even if it is somewhat accurate, there will always be cultural bias attached to these narratives. That is why "some vocal critics maintain that only members of the cultural group represented are capable of producing 'culturally authentic' works" (Gallagher, 1994, p. 20). In order to accurately depict a community and its experiences, it stands to reason that the writer should be a member of that community.

Dual World of First Generation Teens

The adverse effects of immigration and culture clash do not only affect the parents who immigrated to this country. Their children also can have a difficult time straddling their family's culture and American culture. Merely "[h]aving U.S. citizenship doesn't render children immune to immigration-related stressors. They must learn to be flexible, able to withstand constantly straddling the culture their parents came from and the culture they're currently growing up in" (Clark, 2019, p. 5). Some children from immigrant families can feel a marked crisis of identity when they feel like they are living in two worlds simultaneously: one outside of the house where they are immersed in American culture; and one at home with their families who are holding on to the customs of the place from which they came. Often these families do not speak any English at home, so it does feel like a different world for these children.

Another one of the stressors often felt by first-generation American children and teens is the pressure to perform: at school and work. Fiorella Medina (2019) refers to this phenomenon as

> 'immigration parent guilt' that many first generations face. Our parents come to America and work in whatever job they can get so we can go to college and get a career – if not, then their migration was for nothing. (p. 4)

As a result of this pressure—whether explicitly expressed by immigrant parents or not—first-generation Americans often feel pressure to get conventional, high-paying jobs. Sometimes this comes at the expense of their passions and dreams for their lives. It can sometimes feel as though children are a disappointment to their parents for not living up to the expectations of success that they had upon coming to the United States.

One of the first manifestations of this pressure relates to grades in school. Because immigrant parents and family members often made many sacrifices and endured unbelievable hardships to make a life for themselves and their children in the United States, children often feel as though they need to sacrifice as well by excelling in school. Often, this pressure is primarily put on them by family members. As Jessie Kanzer (2019) explains,

> Mom and Dad toiled to build us a life, [and] we were largely cared for by our stoic grandmother, who had lost family in the Holocaust and grew up in the Siberian gulags. 'Ninety-five? Why not a hundred?' she'd ask if I showed off a good grade. (p. 2)

This illustration evokes an interaction to which many first-generation Americans can relate. This guilt can be self-inflicted or can stem from pressure by parents and family members to take advantage of the opportunities that their sacrifices provide.

First-generation Americans can often feel caught between two worlds more tangibly: that is, the world of the United States and the world from which their family

comes. As Debie Thomas (2019) explains it, "[l]ike many adult children of immigrants, I circle around the missing something, trying to pin it down. It's more than dislocation or homesickness. More than the trauma of leaving a mother tongue behind" (Thomas, 2019, p. 2). These feelings can be complicated because although first-generation Americans were not born in the countries from which their families emigrated, they often visit and practice the customs of these nations. These countries are still very much a part of their lives and their hearts.

In this turbulent time of rampant xenophobia and prejudice, young people must see themselves in the books they are reading. As a result, libraries need to ensure that their collections are inclusive of a wide variety of experiences and identities. In order to be an inclusive and welcoming environment for all people in a given user base, institutions like libraries must present a rich, multifaceted collection to their patrons.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The chosen method for this study is qualitative content analysis. This method consists of "the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes" (Julien, 2019, p. 2). It is particularly "helpful in answering 'why' questions and analyzing perception" in a research sample (Julien, 2019, p. 121). This method is commonly used for analyzing interviews, surveys, and existing works. This type of analysis "helps with reducing the amount of material. It requires the researcher to focus on selected aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research question" (Schreir, 2014, p. 170). In undergoing a qualitative content

analysis, the researcher can organize the information from their research more efficiently and utilize their findings to answer their research question(s) accurately.

The first step in this method "requires the examination of every single part of the material that is in any way relevant to the research question" (Schreir, 2014, p. 170). In undergoing this process, the researcher can narrow down the amount of information that relates to their research question(s) before they begin the actual process of coding. The next step is to create an "initial coding scheme from existing theory or knowledge, using the data to modify or expand these codes" (Hseih & Shannon, 2018, p. 393). This scheme should include an identified unit of coding that should stay consistent throughout the data collection and analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2018, p. 393). Then, "the relationships between codes are constructed by arranging them within categories and themes" (Hseih & Shannon, 2018, p. 393). Because "[c]oding serves to reduce and condense the data based on its content and meaning," the researcher must organize the results of the coding in order to complete a successful content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2019, p. 393).

Although content analyses can also be completed with quantitative collection methods, the qualitative method of content analysis makes the most sense for research studies based on cultural texts like novels. Qualitative content analysis is the best method

> for tracking the perspectives from which cultural texts start and the directions to which they lead as they are constructed and reconstructed, and so come to mean what they always provisionally mean, even as they may seem to insist on a fixed, or singular, legitimate interpretation (Pickering, 2004, p. 890)

With qualitative content analysis, the researcher can look for discernable themes within a text and link them to similar presentations of these themes across a group of texts. Then,

they can come to conclusions about what the presence of these themes indicates about the group of sources that they analyzed.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the representation of first-generation American teens in young adult novels that have been published since 2017. This study focused on the following research questions: How have YA novels published since 2017 portrayed the experiences of first-generation American teens? What are the major themes in these novels?

For this study, it is essential to clarify the definition of "first-generation American." This paper works from the assumption that a first-generation American is an individual that is born in the United States to parents who emigrated there from another country. Many different sources define this term in different ways. Some define it as an immigrant who moves to the United States, a.k.a. the first generation of the family that resides in the U.S. However, for this study, I will be researching based on this definition.

Methodology

I undertook a documentary study through qualitative content analysis. In order to examine the representation of first-generation American teens in current young adult literature, I felt that the best way to examine my topic was to read a sample of these books and to analyze them for common themes and the ways in which the authors address these themes and their similarities to the experiences of many first-generation American teens today.

Positionality / Researcher Role

My role as the researcher was to read the chosen sample of novels and find common themes in the books while connecting those themes to the current experiences of first-generation Americans in the current political and social climate. I also connected this research and my findings to ideas regarding how librarians can incorporate books with these themes to diversify their collections and better serve their communities.

I am a second-generation American (my father was born in the U.S. to immigrant parents). However, my family is still very in touch with the culture and traditions of our homeland, and I can relate to the dichotomy between preserving family cultural norms and traditions and trying to assimilate to American society. However, there are issues of racism and prejudice against minorities that came up in these books to which I cannot relate as much.

Sample / Research Participants

My population consisted of young adult novels about first-generation American teens that have been published since 2017. Each book has a protagonist who experiences both American teen culture and the culture of their families. I pulled themes from these books in order to find connections among the books and connect them to the current experience of first-generation teens in the U.S., given the current political and social climate.

My sampling technique was purposive sampling for representativeness. The priority for my sampling technique was representativeness. I chose a variety of books depicting the experiences of first-generation teens whose families come from different parts of the world (India, Latin America, Eastern Europe, East Asia, etc.). I chose these books by searching online on sites such as Goodreads and Novelist for books with first-generation American protagonists. From there, I made a list of the books that I found that best match my query. Then, I figured out which books were published in 2017 and beyond, and I ensured that I chose books with protagonists whose families are from different parts of the world in order to represent a diverse set of experiences.

The main limitation of this sampling method was that I did not use a standardized method for choosing novels, such as a random number generator. I chose books based on my research of novels within this subject matter that I felt best represent the topic and cover a wide range of nationalities and cultures. Because of this limitation, I may have inadvertently left out books that represent my topic. In addition, many of the books that I discovered throughout my research did not quite align with my research questions. Often, the characters were either immigrants themselves, along with their parents, or their

families had been in the United States for multiple generations. As a result, my sample is skewed towards representation of first-generation Americans with cultural backgrounds in the Middle East and Asia. However, as this part of the world is often underrepresented yet constantly the subject of criticism and prejudice—especially by Americans—I thought that it would be beneficial for my study to focus on these stories.

Data Collection Methods

My data collection method focused on existing data, namely young adult novels about first-generation Americans. I believed that using existing data for my data collection methods was the best method to analyze how inclusive young adult literature is for first-generation American teens and how well-represented this population is in popular young adult literature.

I used several master's papers with similar topics and/or methods as guides for my study, including Marli Johnston's (2014) *Autism Spectrum Disorder Representation in Young Adult Literature: A Content Analysis*, Sarah Sculnick's (2019) *"I don't want us to be ashamed anymore": Representations of Latinx Teenage Girls in Young Adult Literature*, Latia Ward's (2015) *A Content Analysis of Major Themes in Young Adult and Middle Grades Novels Published Between 2006 to 2015 That Feature Young Undocumented Immigrants as Protagonists*, and Janet B. West's (2010) *Gender Bias and Stereotypes in Young Adult Literature: A Content Analysis of Novels for Middle School Students*.

As far as my data collection procedure, I read the YA novels that I picked for this project and took extensive notes on how the novels answer my research question. Then I coded my notes and carried out a content analysis of themes like assimilation, parent-

child relationships, and the dichotomy between family cultural norms and traditions and American society.

Data Analysis Methods

I took notes throughout my close reading of each novel. Once I finished reading the novels, I coded my notes in order to find common themes and experiences across my source population. In the end, I returned to the first few books I read to see if I missed any themes that I discovered in later books. I analyzed the sample for overarching themes such as assimilation into American culture, parent-child relationships, and the dichotomy between family cultural norms and traditions and American society.

Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the credibility of my research study and of myself as a researcher, I strove to be transparent about my relationship with my research topic and subjects. As stated previously, while I can relate to the experience of living in a multicultural immigrant family, I am not a first-generation American. Also, because my family is from Eastern Europe, there is an entirely different set of experiences and issues that applies to myself and my family. As I was analyzing books about characters from a variety of different countries and racial and ethnic groups, I was unable to speak to all of these diverse experiences on a personal level. I did, however, ground my work in existing theory about immigration and the psychosocial and political issues that surround this topic, especially in the current climate. I also included examples from my data alongside conclusions and interpretations in order to support my analysis of these sources. Another critical concern was to debrief with my peers throughout the research process to ensure that I remained as accurate and unbiased as possible in my research and interpretations. I also underwent the process of negative case analysis, provided a thick description of my methods and research context, honestly described any problems or challenges that arise, and collected data from multiple sources. By completing all of these steps and precautions, I tried to ensure that my study is as informative and objective as possible.

Limitations

The significant limitations of my study design were that I did not collect data from first-generation American teens or young adult librarians. My primary source of data was the novels themselves and interpreting the stories as part of a larger narrative about immigration and multiculturalism in this country today.

The main delimitations of this study were that I did not get input from first-generation American teens themselves beyond the experiences I read about in the books I chose for my study. I also did not speak directly with librarians about incorporating these books into their collections. Although both of these practices would have been immensely helpful to my overall goals, there was just not enough time to go that in-depth with my research in the time I had to complete this study.

Findings

Although the protagonists in my sample were from different families, lived in different areas of the United States, and identified with different cultural backgrounds, I found several common themes across all of the books that I read. One of the most prominent themes was that of the expectations of family members and the surrounding cultural community and how these expectations were often imposed upon the protagonists. Another key theme across the sample was that of the double life that many first-generation immigrants lead, as mentioned by Clark (2019). As American-born children to immigrant parents, the protagonists in each of the books in the sample struggle in some way with "constantly straddling the culture their parents came from and the culture they're currently growing up in" (Clark, 2019, p. 5). The third, and frankly obvious, theme I noticed was that of prejudice, by both outsiders towards the culture/identity of the protagonist and the inherent biases of the protagonist's family or community members—biases that were often a product of cultural sentiment in the countries from which they immigrated.

All of the protagonists from the sample—Scott from *Down and Across*, Maya from *Love, Hate & Other Filters*, Mei from *American Panda*, Danny from *Picture Us in the Light*, Dimple and Rishi from *When Dimple Met Rishi*, Twinkle and Sahil from *From Twinkle, With Love*, Sweetie and Ashish from *There's Something about Sweetie*, and

Tovah and Adina from *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*—experience most, if not all three, of these themes.

Familial and Communal Expectations

Dating and Marriage

One of the most common instances of the theme of familial and communal expectations in my sample of books was through the ideas of marriage and dating. In the majority of the books, parents and community members pushed endogamy as the best way to ensure that their children would have successful marriages. In *American Panda*, Mei, the protagonist, discusses the long-held belief in their culture that marriage within their community promotes successful and happy marriages. According to Mei's mother, "[m]arrying another Chinese person who understands your upbringing and values—that's what creates a solid foundation for a strong marriage" (Chao, 2018, p. 102). In *Love, Hate, and Other Filters* by Samira Ahmed, Maya notes that she and Kareem, the Indian-American-Muslim boy her parents want her to date, "share an unspoken understanding, two people from similar backgrounds raised in similar ways in America" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 208). She "will never have to explain so many basic things to him" about her culture as she would with Phil, the Anglo-American boy she wants to date (Ahmed, 2018, p. 208).

In Rachel Lynn Solomon's *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*, protagonist Tovah forms a romantic attachment to her Jewish classmate, Zack, because of their shared religious backgrounds, while her sister, Adina, feels drawn to her viola teacher, Arjun, who recently immigrated to the U.S. from India. Both Tovah and Adina feel like they are slightly on the periphery of society because their mother immigrated from Israel, and they both form relationships with people who they feel they can relate to based on their

familial and cultural backgrounds. Unlike Maya and Mei, who both gravitate towards boys outside of their cultural community, Tovah develops feeling for a boy who shares her religious background. In contrast, Adina develops feelings for a man who cannot relate to her specific background, but who can relate to her feelings of not entirely fitting into American society as someone else who comes from a multicultural background.

"Child-of-Immigrant Guilt"

Another key theme among the experiences of the protagonists in the sample was the idea of what Gloria Chao in *American Panda* calls "child-of-immigrant guilt" (Chao, 2019, p. 38). As I referenced earlier, Fiorella Medina calls this same phenomenon "immigration parent guilt," the feeling among many first-generation Americans that their parents sacrifice everything they have to move to a new country and start a new life so that their kids can have success and comfort. Often, this phenomenon manifests in the form of pressure from immigrant parents on their American-born children relating to what they should study and what career they should pursue. Most of the parents in the sample want their children to achieve in school so that they can pursue traditionally-stable careers in fields like medicine and science.

In *American Panda*, this theme presents itself in the form of Mei continually feeling pressure from her parents to get the best grades so that she can get into a top college, then a top medical school, and become a successful doctor. In *Down and Across*, Scott's father pushes him into an internship at a lab. Both Maya from *Love, Hate, and Other Filters* and Twinkle from *From Twinkle, With Love*, are passionate about filmmaking, but their parents do not approve of what they view to be such an unstable

career path. In *When Dimple Met Rishi*, Rishi loves to draw, but his parents want him to study at MIT and go into engineering. In each book, the protagonist eventually follows their dreams, but not without a range of familial issues and strife. One exception to this theme occurs in *Picture Us in the Light*, in which Danny's situation is quite a contrast from that of the others in the sample. He applies to and gets into the Rhode Island School of Design and plans to follow his dream of becoming an artist with full moral and financial support from his parents. Daniel's mother refers to his ability to follow his dream as 'the future we hoped for'" (Gilbert, 2018, p. 43). This reaction is a sharp contrast from those of Mei's and Maya's parents, who disown them when the girls stand up to them in favor of their ambitions and passions.

The Dual-Life

Another striking theme across the novels was the idea of the protagonists feeling like they lead a dual-life, with one foot in the culture of their ancestors and the other foot in American culture. While some characters embraced this feeling, others felt alienated by it, like they did not truly belong in either world. Another manifestation of this theme presented itself in some of the works as the idea that the protagonists were living this complicated life in America. However, at the same time, they had family living in their ancestral country with all of the traditions that their parents brought over to the U.S. Often, their ancestral land was a symbol not only of what their parents had achieved in starting a new life in the United States but more importantly it acted as a symbol of their enduring cultural identity in the face of all of the challenges they came up against in the United States.

In *American Panda*, Mei experiences a symbolic manifestation of her experience of a dual-life. One day, as she is walking through Boston, she comes to the entrance of Chinatown. She observes Chinatown on one side, and McDonald's and The W Hotel on the other. She muses on the fact that she does not feel like she truly belongs in either world. Earlier in the book, she discusses this feeling with her mother and how it is different for her generation because, unlike their parents, they "were born here, live here. It's Chinese culture at home, American culture everywhere else" (Chao, 2018, p. 198). While her parents feel more of a connection to their roots in Taiwan, Mei always feels torn between her culture and her desire to embrace her identity as an American.

In *There's Something About Sweetie*, Sweetie experiences a similar divide in which she feels that her parents and their friends and family are eager for their children to identify more with India than America. While Sweetie does embrace both cultures, she often feels like she has to defend this to others. When her mother's friend makes a disparaging remark about "American boys," Sweetie defends Americans, reminding the woman that both her daughter and Sweetie were born in America, and are therefore American (Menon, 2019, p. 55).

Unlike Sweetie, Ashish hardly embraces any aspect of his Indian culture at the beginning of *There's Something About Sweetie*. By the end of the book, he has become accustomed to being known in the community as "Ash, the selfish player who doesn't even want to acknowledge the Indian part of his identity" (Menon, 2019, p. 330). However, throughout the book, he embraces more of his cultural identity as he spends time with Sweetie, to the point where he does not just see it as his parents' culture anymore, but as an identity he can embody as well.

In *When Dimple Met Rishi*, Rishi and Dimple view their dual-lives very differently. While Rishi embraces his family's culture as a significant part of his identity, Dimple resents her culture and often feels like an outsider in both worlds. Rishi finds comfort in the fact that he and Dimple are "connected by this thread to people who live in the place where we came from. Where our parents came from. We have a blueprint for our lives" (Menon, 2017, p. 179). On the other hand, Dimple finds the rules and customs of their cultural background "stifling" (Menon, 2017, p. 179). While Rishi feels as though he is a part of a culture shared by his ancestors and an entire country of people with rich cultural practices and history, Dimple feels like an outsider in both worlds. She describes her relationship with her cultural background, especially as a child, as "feeling like I didn't belong. I mean, I was already going through that phase at my school where I felt like my family was weird and different and I just wished they'd be like all the other parents. But then I went to Mumbai and realized that to all the people there, I was American. I was still the outsider, and still strange, and I still didn't belong" (Menon, 2017, p. 223). Like Mei in *American Panda*, Dimple often felt like she was standing on the threshold of two worlds, but she never felt like she belonged in either of them.

Othering

John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian (2016) define othering as "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (p. 17). Othering serves to make marginalized peoples feel separate and different from the majority, whether the effect is intentional or not. In my personal experience, othering can either be blatant and aggressive—through behaviors like bullying, slurs, and blatant

prejudice—or it can be more subtle. Often, othering manifests in the form of commenting on how difficult it is to pronounce someone's name or how different the food they eat is from the food you eat. Across the spectrum, othering serves to make individuals feel left out of the majority culture because of a particular identity that they hold.

Names

Every single protagonist in the sample at some point experienced the feelings of discomfort and isolation that come with having a name that most people around them deem to be foreign and unfamiliar. In *American Panda*, Mei goes to the student clinic, and the nurse mispronounces her first name. In *Down and Across*, Scott discusses the bullying he endured as a child when his classmates would come up with cruel variations of his given name, Saaket. In *Picture Us in the Light*, Danny's parents tell him that they are changing their surnames in order to make them easier to pronounce for Americans. In *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*, Tovah describes a similar experience in which a DJ at a roller rink "hesitates before saying my name, the way most people do when faced with an unfamiliar word. It's not hard to pronounce, but I don't like how he utters it: like he's questioning it" (Solomon, 2018, p. 17). In *Love, Hate, and Other Filters*, the difference between Maya's name and those of her classmates is particularly striking after an Egyptian immigrant who shares her surname is accused of committing a terrorist attack in her community.

Food

Another way in which the protagonists in the sample often felt "othered" was through the reactions of their peers to the ethnic foods they ate. In *Love, Hate, and Other*

Filters, Maya remembers how she brought her favorite dessert, *barfi*, to class for her birthday in elementary school and how her classmates made fun of her because they thought the name sounded like 'barf.' In *American Panda*, Mei looks back on how the other kids in her class made fun of her when her parents sent her to school with pork floss sandwiches, saying that they "looked like pubes" (Chao, 2018, p. 145). In *There's Something About Sweetie*, an American couple visits Sweetie's mother's booth at the farmer's market, where she sells her homemade baked goods. While the couple does not poke fun at the delicacies, their reaction feels slightly fetishizing of Indian culture. The woman immediately tells Sweetie and her mother that she and her husband are "are total Indian fanatics" in a way that feels patronizing to Sweetie, even if the intent may have been benevolent (Menon, 2019, p. 40).

Prejudice and Xenophobia

Unfortunately, the most common theme across my sample was that of prejudice and xenophobia directed at the protagonists and their families. This theme presented itself in a variety of ways across the books: sometimes, it came in the form of microaggressions, sometimes it was exhibited by slurs and physical violence. In each novel, the protagonists faced discrimination and hatred along with the already challenging experience of adolescence, topped with the struggles of feeling out of place in a country that often values homogeny over multiculturalism.

In most of the novels, xenophobia and prejudice against the protagonists and their families usually came in the form of microaggressions and hate speech. In *From Twinkle, With Love*, Twinkle describes a moment in which she and her friend were at school, and a boy taunted them, saying that "Maddie and I weren't real Americans and how my parents

were fresh off the boat" (Menon, 2018, p. 16). In *Picture Us in The Light*, Danny describes one of his first experiences with prejudice. As a child, one day, he was playing outside when an older man berated him for being in the way, insisting that he does not "own this neighborhood. It's not yours to make a mess all over. That's the problem with you people. You think you can come in here and take over. You tell your parents we don't want you here. You go back where you came from" (Gilbert, p. 32-33). This experience has a lasting effect on Danny's psyche as he grows into an adult as one of the first times that someone made him feel less-than because of how he looked.

While there were not many instances of blatant prejudice directed against Tovah or Adina in *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*, their story highlighted the lack of inclusivity that is so rampant in our society and how hurtful it can be to those who are excluded as if their stories and feelings do not matter. Tovah laments over the fact that her town is decorated for Christmas, while Chanukah is wholly overlooked. As she puts it, "It's easy to be inclusive, and yet most people just don't care" (Solomon, 2018, p. 160). It is hurtful to her that people in her community assume that everyone celebrates Christmas, especially given the hardships and horrors that Jewish people have endured in order to practice their religion.

In a few of the books in the sample, microaggressions and verbal taunts escalated into outright physical violence. In *Down and Across*, Scott remembers elementary school as a rough time in which his classmates would make fun of his name and how he looked because they perceived him as different from them. He talks about how he does not like to tell people he is Iranian because of the negative association that a lot of Americans have with the country. He also faces discrimination for his religion; notably, when a girl

he starts dating tells him they cannot be in a serious relationship because he is Muslim, and she is Christian. However, the xenophobia and Islamophobia that Scott endures throughout the novel comes to a head when a drunk man beats him up outside of a bar, repeatedly shouting slurs at him and calling him a terrorist.

Similarly, in *Love, Hate, and Other Filters*, Maya experiences both verbal abuse and physical violence as a result of her Muslim background. After a terrorist attack in her hometown, her community members are quick to blame Muslims for the tragedy. After the attack, one of Maya's classmates taunts her and asks her, "'Why don't you people leave America if you hate it so much?'" and proceeds to call her and other Muslims "ragheads" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 279). After someone throws a brick through the window of Maya's parents' medical practice, local law enforcement cracks down on hate crimes, and her school suspends the classmate for his comments to her. Later in the novel, he corners her on a school field trip to an amusement park and physically abuses her, saying "'I didn't ask you to come to our country'" and "'[m]y brother lost his leg in Iraq because of you…people'" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 354). He blames his brother's injury on an entire group of people that had nothing to do with it, and yet he sees his pain as a justification for the suffering he causes Maya.

For the most part, the protagonists of these novels quietly internalize these expressions of hatred and ignorance. Others, like Tovah in *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone* and Twinkle in *From Twinkle, With Love*, silently resent them. In some cases, the response of the protagonist depended on the person spewing xenophobia and microaggressions. In *Down and Across*, Scott responds with shock and disgust when the girl he is dating claims that they cannot ever be serious about each other because he is

Muslim. However, later in the book, Scott is overpowered by a drunk adult man who starts beating him up and calling him a terrorist. Because he cannot fight back against the physically stronger man who is also under the influence, his response is to try and run away, losing his cellphone in the process. In *Love, Hate, and Other Filters*, Maya tries to rationalize the hatred she experiences, especially from her classmate, Brian. When he spews angry words at her, such as telling her to go back to her own country, she responds by telling him that she was born in the U.S., just like he was. Unsurprisingly, this response does not affect Brian's attitude towards her. No matter where Maya was born, Brian hates her because of deep-seated ignorance and hatred that has been embedded in his psyche probably since childhood. Unfortunately, Maya's rationalization cannot quell the anger and hate to which Brian subjects her.

Although these books represent prejudice and xenophobia in a variety of different ways and degrees, they exhibit the pain that comes with being ostracized for your identity. Whether it manifests as microaggressions or outright violence, the protagonists of the sample all experience this hurtful prejudice at some point. Their experiences are a symbol for the all-too-common practice of shunning and bullying people because they have a different accent, their skin is a different color, or they practice a different religion.

Discussion

It was interesting how these themes permeated across each of the novels in my sample, even though different authors wrote them about different cultures and experiences from around the United States. Although each protagonist was an individual with their own ambitions, desires, and experiences, they all shared feelings to which many first-generation Americans can relate. In some way, each of the books depicted the stress of parental and communal expectations on first-generation American teens and the dual-life that many children of immigrants experience while trying to navigate their cultural background and their life in the United States.

Unfortunately, the most common theme across the sample was that of prejudice and exclusion. Throughout our history, the United States has fostered a culture of division and hatred that does not seem to abate, even as our government signs new laws into action, and people become more educated about global history and culture. There is still a trend of blaming an entire group of people for the problems of our country. Since the terrorist attacks of 2001, the trend in the United States has increasingly been to attack Muslim communities and individuals, as presented in *Love, Hate, and Other Filters* and *Down and Across*. Therefore, not only do the protagonists of these novels (and their real-life counterparts) have to deal with the usual stressors that come with adolescence, but they also have to worry about hate crimes, hate speech, and microaggressions.

Multiculturalism is a considerable part of America's history. However, many people seem to forget that and act as though the white Anglo-Saxon majority deserves to call themselves Americans more than people from other cultural backgrounds. Instances like what Danny experienced as a kid in *Picture Us in The* Light contribute to the formation of people's psyches and instill in them the idea that they are not as worthy of respect as others because they look or sound different. The all-too-familiar phrase "go back where you came from" is extremely hurtful and does not even make sense. Many of the main characters in the sample are told some form of this hate speech, and yet they were all born in the United States. However, because they are not white and they practice different cultural traditions from the majority, many people around them assume that they are not American. Being American does not mean that you are inherently Christian and only eat hamburgers and hot dogs and listen to country music. A wealth of cultures and backgrounds form the American identity.

Not all prejudice comes in the form of outright hate speech. A lot of the time, people experience prejudice through a lack of inclusivity in schools, public spaces, and social groups. As Tovah posits in *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*, "[i]t's easy to be inclusive, and yet most people just don't care" (Solomon, 2018, p. 160). On the other hand, many people view inclusive language like "Happy Holidays" as an affront to their values. There is room for all cultures and identities in our society. That is why libraries should be inclusive spaces in which children, teens, and adults can see themselves and their experiences in the books that they read. Besides, everyone should read stories about people with different experiences than themselves in order to grow their compassion for others and their knowledge of the world around them.

Potential Stakeholders and Impact

The potential stakeholders for my research study are primarily first-generation American teens who would relate to the books that I used as the basis for my study. I hope that this study will increase awareness of books that effectively and honestly recount the experiences of first-generation American teens to the point that these teens feel represented and understood. I also hope that librarians might read this study and then decide to diversify their collections by adding these books or those similar to the ones I use for this study.

Hopefully, this study will inspire librarians to include more diverse books in their collections, especially at a time when immigrants and minority groups can feel primarily targeted in the current political climate. Children and teens need to feel welcome in libraries, and the best way to include them is to have books that represent their experiences. Also, children and teens can greatly benefit from reading about people their age with vastly different experiences. If they can connect with these characters through reading, it can increase their sense of empathy for other people and different hardships that people face. Reading connects people to the characters in their books, to the authors who write them, and to the people around them. Because of this possibility for connection, librarians and educators must make their collections as diverse as possible to give different groups a voice and agency. However, they should also incorporate these books and sources into their curricula and programs. Ordering books with diverse stories and characters can help underrepresented children and teens feel included in the library and academic spaces, but most children will probably not seek out these books if they are not introduced to them. Therefore, it is crucial that librarians and teachers not only

include these books in their collections, but also that they directly introduce these books to young people through reading assignments, book groups, and other programs.

Conclusion

Although not wholly comprehensive, as mentioned previously, my sample of eight young adult novels featuring first-generation American protagonists that were published between 2017 and today was enlightening and sufficient to answer my research questions (How have YA novels published since 2017 portrayed the experiences of first-generation American teens? What are the major themes in these novels?). I found several themes that applied to each of the novels in one way or another, but in varied enough ways to have my research include a spectrum that reflected the variety of experiences of first-generation Americans in American society since the 2016 election.

I hope that young adult librarians will use this study to evaluate books for inclusion in their collections that represent a wide variety of experiences and identities. There has been a wealth of studies and information regarding why it is so important to include diverse books and #OwnVoices works in youth library collections, but I hope that my research will take these studies further. In my initial research, I found a variety of information about books about immigrants, but first-generation Americans and their particular experiences pose a different set of issues and questions. As children of immigrants but natural-born citizens of the United States, first-generation Americans continuously have one foot in their parents' culture and one in American culture. Due to the specific nature of these experiences, libraries must include stories that represent this demographic, too.

In order to fight the hatred and prejudice that seems rampant in our society, books and other forms of entertainment should represent the variety of people and experiences in the United States, not just those of the majority groups. That way, not only can we educate the masses about the various issues facing different groups in the United States, but more importantly, we can help historically-marginalized groups feel seen and heard in a society in which they have been forcibly silenced for so long.

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Appendix A. Sample Selection

	A	B	C	D	E
1	**Title**	**Author**	**Immigrant or American-Born Protagonist(s)?**	**Country/Area of Origin of Protagonist/Family**	**Publication Year**
2	When Dimple Met Rishi	Sandhya Menon	American-Born	India	2017
3	There's Something About Sweetie	Sandhya Menon	American-Born	India	2019
4	Love, Hate & Other Filters	Samira Ahmed	American-Born	India	2018
5	Born Confused	Tanuja Desai Hidier	American-Born	India	2003
6	Bombay Blues	Tanuja Desai Hidier	American-Born	India	2014
7	You Bring The Distant Near	Mitali Perkins	American-Born	India	2019
8	Tell Me Again How A Crush Should Feel	Sara Farizan	American-Born	Iran	2014
9	Darius the Great Is Not Okay	Adib Khorram	American-Born	Iran	2018
10	Kira-Kira	Cynthia Kadohata	American-Born	Japan	2006
11	Good Enough	Paula Yoo	American-Born	Korea	2008
12	Girl Mans Up	M-E Girard	American-Born	Portugal	2016
13	Shadowshaper	Daniel Jose Older	American-Born	Puerto Rico	2015
14	The Astonishing Color of After	Emily X.R. Pan	American-Born	Taiwan	2018
15	American Panda	Gloria Chao	American-Born	Taiwan	2018
16	Down and Across	Arvin Ahmadi	American-Born	Iran	2018
17	Picture Us in the Light	Kelly Loy Gilbert	American-Born	China	2018
18	Tash Hearts Tolstoy	Kathryn Ormsbee, K.E. Ormsbee	American-Born	Eastern Europe	2017
19	From Twinkle, with Love	Sandhya Menon	American-Born	India	2018
20	Pride	Ibi Zoboi	American-Born	Latin America	2018
21	Gabi, A Girl in Pieces	Isabel Quintero	American-Born	Mexico	2014
22	What Can(t) Wait	Ashley Hope Perez	American-Born	Mexico	2011
23	I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter	Erika L. Sanchez	American-Born	Mexico	2017
24	Our Stories Our Voices	Various	Both	Various	2018

This table contains the books I compiled from extensive research and the selection criteria (citizenship of protagonist, country of origin, publication year) that helped me choose seven of these books as my sample (I found the eighth, Rachel Lynn Solomon's *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*, later in my research process).

Appendix B. Materials Sample

Ahmadi, A. (2018). *Down and across*. New York, NY: Viking. Kindle.

Ahmed, S. (2018). *Love, hate & other filters*. New York, NY: Soho Teen. Libby.

Chao, G. (2018). *American panda*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Google Books.

Gilbert, K. L. (2018). *Picture us in the light*. Los Angeles, CA: Hyperion. Libby.

Menon, S. (2017). *When Dimple met Rishi*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Libby.

Menon, S. (2018). *From Twinkle, with love*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Kindle.

Menon, S. (2019). *There's something about Sweetie*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Kindle.

Solomon, R. L. (2018). *You'll miss me when I'm gone*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Kindle.